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ABSTRACT

In response to the closure and down-sizing of fish plants in Newfoundland, Cabot College (CC) established a Student Support Services Unit (SSSU) to offer special counseling and advising services to the more than 100 students expected to undertake vocational retraining at CC under the province's Fisheries Adjustment Program. The SSSU hired two student counselors, who, under the direction of a coordinator, supplied and monitored a peer tutoring service, offered information seminars, and established an academic resource bank. The SSSU adopted an open-door policy requiring no prior appointments by students, and initiated a program of group interaction to ease the transition from work to school. Each student entering the retraining program met with a counselor for an initial "get-acquainted" interview. Group sessions, which met three times each week, addressed such student-identified topics as how to read a textbook; note-taking skills; preparing for tests; and coping with stress. During the sessions, students reported having problems of low self-esteem, a disruption of family life, and feelings of isolation from their spouses. For a specific group of 22 students planning to enter a nursing assistant course, a special preliminary curriculum was developed, covering such areas as computers, mathematics, life skills, student success, and orientation to the role of nursing assistant. All 20 of the students who completed the course eventually found union-scale employment as nursing assistants. Of the more than 100 students who entered the program in the first year, only three were terminated, representing an attrition rate much lower than that of CC's mainstream student body. (PAA)

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The closure or down-sizing of fish plants in Newfoundland meant the loss of may jobs throughout the province. Employment and Immigration Canada, through its Fisheries Adjustment Program, made a concentrated effort to address the needs of displaced fish plant workers seeking training in alternate fields of employment. In response to this initiative, acting on the premise that a formerly stable work group would benefit greatly from a strong continuum of support, Cabot College requested, and was granted, extra funding to establish a Student Support Services Unit. The unit would support all students accepted under this program. Two student counsellors/advisors were to be hired, who would, under the direction of a coordinator, offer to the approximately 100 students expected, a level of services not normally available to students (see diagram). The retraining of displaced workers has historically been linked to less than positive experiences for many students involved in such programs offered (Leigh). This innovative approach was welcomed by the funding agent because everyone was anxious that these students would be successful.

Counselling Model:

Since the students under the program had stable work histories, few, if any, would have had extended contact with the helping professions and it was felt they may be reluctant to reach out for help. It was determined that to be effective, a pro-active model of counselling would have to be used. Students must be able to visit the advisors as they felt the need. The unit adopted an open door policy that would require no prior appointments. The unit would focus on the early identification and resolution of problems while they were still manageable. A program of group building and interaction designed to smooth the transition from work to school was also established. The unit supplied and monitored a peer tutoring service, offered information seminars, and established an academic resource bank to help students.

Counselling Goals:

The primary goal of the advisors was to provide all possible services to increase the likelihood of these students achieving success in their chosen areas. The advisors understood that if the students were to enjoy a successful educational experience at Cabot, some means of intervention had to be available to cushion any negative impact these clients might feel at the beginning of collegiate life. These students had lost more than stable jobs; they had lost the "sense of identity" associated with such work units. They had lost some of the self-respect they formerly felt from being part of a community. Much of the meaning of their lives (making a contribution, being valued, having sufficient money) had also been disrupted as had the structure of going to work every day and feeling capable and safe from future needs. The support unit endeavoured to act as a surrogate social system to supply some of these missing components as well as to supply academic and informational services.

Orientation Meetings:

The first personal contact students had with the unit was during the orientation meetings. These were arranged to outline available services and explain the maze of activities that confront new students. In order to build "links to support" early in their school experience, each student met with a counsellor/advisor for a get-acquainted

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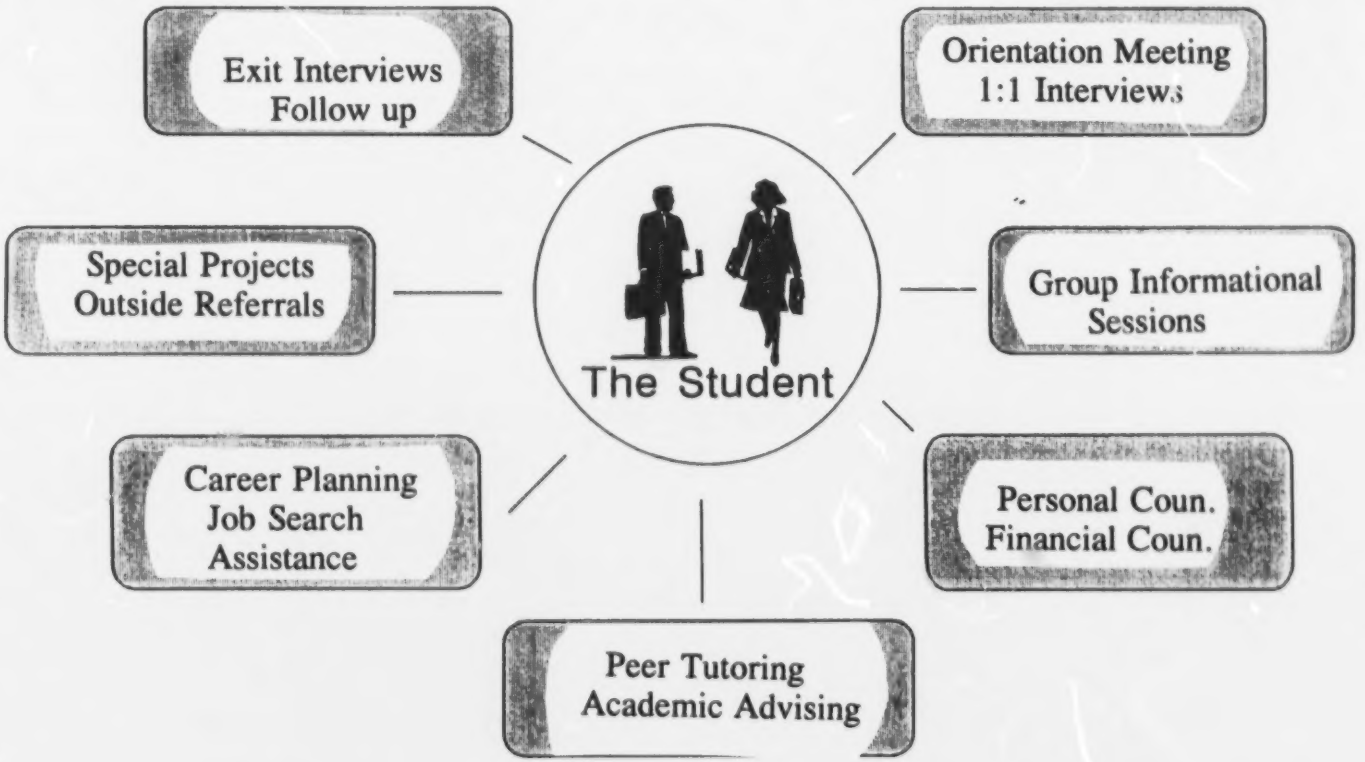
STUDENT SUPPORT UNIT

Services Offered

☆ *LOW ADVISOR/STUDENT RATIO*

☆ *OPEN DOOR*

☆ *PROACTIVE*



interview. This additional interaction gave the counsellors a more relaxed and in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the students. The information gained heightened rapport and enhanced advisor effectiveness when problems did arise.

Group Sessions:

Another way in which the unit reached the students was in the use of regular group sessions. On these occasions programs were developed around topics that were identified by the students. The four topics of priority that emerged during the first of these tri-weekly meetings were the following:

- How to Read a Textbook
- Note-taking Skills
- Preparing for Tests
- Coping with Stress

The objectives of these sessions were:

- To furnish opportunities for students to interact with others registered under the Fisheries Adjustment Program.
- To establish and build group identity and rapport.
- To encourage students to verbalize problem situations and frustrations that may be common to others in the group.
- To provide concrete information and techniques on how to be more successful in their studies.
- To encourage peer cooperation in problem solving.

Student Fears:

Many student problems were linked to past negative learning experiences. Less than 50% of the students had completed high school during formal schooling, although some had upgraded and had been awarded GED certificates. The past failures and fears of the students threatened to again sabotage their learning. Albert Bandura (1988) said, "People who have a strong belief in their capabilities think, feel and behave differently from those who have doubts about their capabilities." These doubts were continually surfacing and plaguing students throughout the year. When confronted with difficult material they often took the problems they were experiencing as evidence that they lacked the ability to complete their programs.

Their personal lives were often further disrupted by their need to take time formerly spent with the family to study or complete assignments. Spouses felt isolated at times because their mates had entered this new world of books, studies and tests. Time was spent helping these students find a workable balance in their family and school activities.

In talking with the students the full impact that the plant closure had on their lives was typified by the comments of one woman who said,

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"Going back to school for any adult is difficult. For someone who has just been laid off and is facing a bleak future, the change can be traumatic. But I faced the reality of my situation and decided, for the good of myself and my three children, that I would have to move. It causes financial strain to keep a house going in one community and move in to the city and pay rent. When I began last August, it was very difficult. Every Sunday when I left my home and my daughters, there were tears; it was very difficult." (This woman has now completed a two year course in Food Administration and is employed in a hospital.)

Modelling also had a positive effect on student outcomes. Being a fish plant worker carried a stigma for many who felt they were seen by others as belonging to a lower social class and having less academic ability than others. However, when students saw others just like themselves coping well with learning experiences they began to feel empowered and were able to continue. The successes of their co-workers became victories for the entire group.

Pre-course Orientation Session:

Spanning the gap that exists between a fish plant where physical work is what one is paid to do, to college life where different strengths are required, is never an easy thing.

Since the beginning of this training initiative at Cabot, members of the Fisheries Adjustment Planning Committee and others involved with the delivery of this program have been aware of the added stress that was being placed on this already-traumatized population as they returned to school. They knew reorientation to be a major problem for returning students, particularly if they had been away from formal learning for one, two, or even three decades. However, when the first students entered classes in September they had chosen seats in a variety of pre-employment and technology courses. Because of this it was not possible to arrange a bridging program to help those students make up for any skills they lacked.

However, for a particular group of students who planned to enter a nursing assistant course in January, Cabot designed a program that would see these students better prepared to enter a challenging medical program. The six-week program offered by Cabot developed a curriculum aimed primarily at introducing these displaced workers to college life.

The areas of instruction included:

- Introduction to Computers
- Mathematics
- Communications and Life Skills
- Student Success
- Orientation to the Role of the Nursing Assistant

Twenty of the twenty-two students went on to complete the course (two withdrew for non-academic reasons). All are now employed as nursing assistants at full union rates.

In speaking with these students at graduation, they felt the pre-course program was essential to their success. They said that such a period aided them in their transition from work to school and familiarized them with what they were expected to achieve.

Conclusion:

These students presented to the advisors a whole range of problems, problems that are common in any cross-section of population. However, in addition, this group was suffering a multiplier effect brought on by the loss of their jobs, and vague fears of the future disappearance of their way of life. In many cases, electing to enter training programs had separated them from their usual support systems of families and friends. Many now had to commute long distances or find temporary accommodation near the school.

Burdened by this cumulative stress, many exhibited outward symptoms of their problems. Some clients were already receiving professional help for addictions or emotional problems. The students knew that whatever happened they could depend on the help of the advisors. The informal approach worked well. Not only did students share problems but they also shared triumphs. Although formal contracting was a method not regularly used, there seemed to exist an unwritten contract between advisor/student of shared ownership of achievement. Advisors were the first to know about student highs and lows. This enabled early interventions to be put into place to stave off either student's withdrawal, or their being isolated when dealing with personal difficulties.

The high student retention rate, combined with the continuing success of students within the program, testifies to the benefits that can be obtained by providing students with adequate support structures. The number of students enrolled under the Fisheries Adjustment Training program in the first year was in excess of 100, yet only three students were terminated. The decision to "take the advisor to the student" in an attempt to identify problems early helped many students to remain in school.

The Fisheries Adjustment Program has, from comments received from students and instructors, been responsible for helping many students remain in school despite the difficult situations they had to face. The value of the unit was evidenced by the fact that often students would bring non-fishery students and ask for the help of the advisors in assisting their friends with difficulties. Instructors also brought other students not in the program to the unit for advice or encouragement.

The program has continued at Cabot and extra staff have been secured to care for the program expansion into a second year. The program continues to maintain a level of attrition much lower than that of the mainstream student body of the college.

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